

African maroon resistance at Hispaniola heavily challenged European conquest

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Map of Hispaniola by Paolo di Forlani (1564). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

African resistance strongly shaped Spanish Hispaniola of the 1500s—

now the island home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic—but historians have often considered that resistance to be a byproduct of Spanish colonialism and its reliance on slavery, according to a University of Kansas historian who studies the development of race in Latin America.

However, in a new study, Robert Schwaller, KU associate professor history, argues that Spanish colonial records reveal that [resistance](#) by indigenous and African maroons, who were runaway slaves, not only tested Spanish economic and labor arrangements but also challenged European conquest itself.

"This resistance tells us that the Spanish conquest hadn't really been completed and the actors that prevented that completion were African maroons," Schwaller said. "The act of becoming maroons and living as maroons represented a form of conquest in and of itself. What we see then is that African resistance challenged the Spanish narrative that they conquered the island."

He presents his evidence in the article "Contested Conquests: African Maroons and the Incomplete Conquest of Hispaniola, 1519-1620," published in November in the journal *The Americas*.

Since the 1520s, runaway African slaves formed maroon communities in remote regions of the island, areas beyond Spanish settlement. From the 1520s to the 1620s maroons posed a constant threat to Spanish development, and repeated campaigns of suppression failed to eradicate their presence.

For the research, he reviewed documents and communications from Spanish officials at the time that detailed their struggles in Hispaniola. Although such sources do not preserve maroon voices, they do reveal that generations of maroons formed communities that placed swaths of

the island under African control.

"What we see in this 100-year span is that the Spanish constantly tried to eradicate maroons across the island," Schwaller said.

A major finding of his research is that maroon resistance provides evidence that the Spanish conquest of Hispaniola was not complete.

"From its inception, the Spanish conquest was vulnerable to these forms of resistance," he said.

Even as new Spanish conquests spread to the mainland, from Mexico to the Southwest United States and from Peru to Chile, Africans controlled significant portions of Spain's first colonial foothold.

"As this time period came to a close, the Spanish did something unique in the history of European colonialism," Schwaller added.

Because they could not dominate the island, the Spanish instead abandoned and forcibly removed their own Spanish subjects from the north and west of the island, which would eventually be taken over by the French.

Most scholars have seen this decision to be a response to contraband trade between Spanish subjects and foreign traders. While Schwaller acknowledged contraband was a prime mover of the decisions, his research shows that African resistance contributed to the decision to abandon the west of the island.

"Their resistance had a powerful impact on what the Spaniards could do on the island and how many resources they had to dedicate to protecting their economic interests or stamping out African maroons," Schwaller said.

This type of research undercuts a more typical view of European colonialism and how it entered the Americas, he said.

"This is important today because it reminds us that these narratives of European domination and supremacy weren't really true," Swaller said. "There were [indigenous peoples](#) and Africans transplanted by slavery who challenged European empires, and they challenged them in ways that profoundly altered how these European empires developed and made decisions."

More information: Robert C. Swaller, *Contested Conquests: African Maroons and the Incomplete Conquest of Hispaniola, 1519–1620*, *The Americas* (2018). [DOI: 10.1017/tam.2018.3](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2018.3)

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